RICH MAN, POOR MAN
Mark 10:17-27
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One of the Princes of the Pulpit of the last generation was fond of saying that the purpose of preaching was to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable". The trouble with that is that he - preacher - is, more often than not, one of the comfortable himself. If he brings integrity to the task, discomfort will be self-inflicted first.

That, by way of saying that the ten verses I have just read to you make me very uncomfortable. We are all, in a sense, selective readers of the Bible. Even literalists must decide which parts to take literally. Mostly, we'd like to ignore this sequence which is found in all three Synoptic Gospels. In fact there is evidence that it so disturbed the Gospel writers themselves that they attempted to soften it a bit.

As for us, our defense mechanisms go to work as soon as the story begins. The man in the tale was very wealthy. We are not. One of the curiosities of our age is that what used to be called the Upper Class has disappeared. We are all Middle Class. If, in fact, we have a lot of this world's goods we are Upper Middle Class. But, we are convinced, there are no more rich people. Rich people are a thing of the past.

I drove to Pennsylvania last weekend to attend the twentieth reunion of my college graduating class. I spent most of the time with three fraternity brothers with whom I had shared a room twenty years ago. At the time, none of us had very much discretionary money. In fact, we didn't have any. We spent much of our time lamenting the fact, and the sorry economic situation in which life had placed us. Twenty years later, one is an executive with Sperry-Univac, one owns several furniture stores in northern New Jersey, doing very well, one is in Investment Real Estate in Wilmington. After we had congratulated ourselves on our obvious success, however, a strange thing began to happen. We started to talk like we used to talk: how tight money is, how rough inflation has been on us. Instead of comparing the holes in the sleeves of our sweaters we compared fuel bills, tuition bills, mortgages. We - and I would suggest that it is true for most of us - are made uncomfortable and defensive by the very thought of wealth. "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God." My, we wish He hadn't said that. The only way to avoid confronting what He meant is to deny that we are in the picture at all. We aren't rich: He means someone else. It's a bit of self administered anesthesia: we simply must find some way to soften or compromise what He said. I confess that I engage in the same exercise whenever I am forced to think about hungry children. John R. Fry pricks my conscience by suggesting that the only theology worth reading will be written from the point of view of a mother in Calcutta who has just watched her baby die of starvation. That makes me so uncomfortable I find myself grasping for any self-serving rationalization I can find. "After all, what can I do? Everybody knows the problem of hunger is very complicated: simply shipping food over there isn't the resolution," etc., etc. ad infinitum, until the pain goes away.

We talk poor, frankly, to avoid confronting the fact that we are rich.

Last fall Saturday Review published an article to that effect entitled "Let's Cut the Poortalk". The authors, both psychologists, maintained that, "A debilitating idea afflicts American thinking. It is highly contagious, perhaps because

people enjoy having it. Moreover, once it starts to spread, people quickly try to one-up each other to see who has it the worst. The ailment contaminates people at all levels of income and education - college faculty, union workers, business executives...We call this affliction poortalk."

According to the authors, the reasons for poortalk are not complicated. "As people's spending outstrips their income, they feel and proclaim that they are underpaid, defeated by inflation and taxes...Friends grouse to one another about rising costs and find bittersweet pleasure in itemizing what they cannot afford. People living in lavish homes bemoan the cost of trivial items."

The authors reach back into their psychological experience for an explanation. The "adaption-level principle" is its name and it means that our "expectations of success and failure, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, even justice and injustice are relative to our prior experience and to what we observe people like ourselves receiving..." Thus, yesterday's luxuries become today's necessities, a dynamic everyone of us has experienced and which, if recalled, allows parents to play a very satisfying game with their children called "Why, when I was your age I had to walk through three foot snow drifts, and ford an icy stream in the dark:" This is usually the last thing said before you drive them the two blocks to school because it's drizzling. "Yesterday's luxuries are today's necessities."

The fact is that we are not poor. Consumer prices have doubled in twenty years: average income has tripled. Real, disposable income has risen 57%. "We had more money when we earned less" is poortalk. It isn't true. We have more - vastly more - than anyone else in history, anyone else in the world. No matter how pinched we are - we are wealthy. The authors spell out the negative effects of poortalk in psychological terms: it makes us feel worse than we need to: it focuses on ourselves rather than others: it interferes with the necessary recalibration of our expectations in a time of inflation. But the real issue, I believe, is theological. We engage in poortalk - we feel poor - when we forget who we are. And we forget who we are when we forget the Gospel. That's what our scripture lesson is about this morning.

There are three parts to the sequence. In the first, a wealthy young man comes running to Jesus, throws himself at Jesus' feet, producing an interesting contrast, to say the least - an aristocrat kneeling before a poor man on his way to becoming a criminal - and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus recites the second section of the Ten Commandments which the young man has already kept. That is to say, he has done all the right things but he doesn't feel right. He hasn't experienced God's love and his own salvation. "Therefore", said Jesus, "the trouble must be your wealth. Get rid of it. All of it. Sell out, liquidate, give it all away, and come follow me." I don't know whether Mark is trying to be humorous but I've always found what he says next about the young man very funny. "His countenance fell." I should guess so. Can you imagine someone proposing that to you? People become impatient when the church asks for an increase, which if divided equally among all of us amounts to less than a meal for four at a good downtown restaurant. Can you imagine what it would be like if someone had the audacity to propose that you sell everything you have? No wonder his countenance fell.

The young man fades at that point. Jesus issued a warning about wealth and discipleship which, frankly, astonished His followers. The official teaching of

Judaism was the opposite. The prophets, to be sure, had at times come down hard on wealth, but the Rabbis mostly identified wealth with divine blessing. Rich people were good people. Poor people were sinners. Besides, they didn't have the time or the resources to be good Jews. The disciples were amazed at the suggestion that it will be hard for wealthy people to get in because, up until that time, they thought the Kingdom was filled with them.

And then He told a very short parable which must have left them breathless and against which Christian people have been arguing for twenty centuries. A one sentence parable: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God."

Now, the scholars are going to try to help us out of this dilemma by pointing out that the Greek word for rope is very similar to the word for camel. Some of them are going to suggest a clerical error here. What Jesus really said, they will maintain, is that it is easier for a piece of twine, cord, rope to go through the eye of the needle. At least the image would be consistent: the task is arduous, unlikely, but not impossible. Other scholars are going to point out that ancient city walls had small openings through which late arrivers, after dark, might enter without the dangerous necessity of opening the gates to the potential enemy. This, they contend, was the eye of the needle. A camel could get through - on his knees, with his owner pushing and pulling. Imaginative preachers on Stewardship Sunday have even been known to suggest that loaded camels particularly will have difficulty, that the camel can squeeze through if some of the goods are unloaded - as in a pledge to the church. It is an approach to fund raising not to be taken lightly.

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Most scholars, however, believe that Jesus was using outrageous hyperbole to punctuate His point, and that the tension created by this stern demand was intended. Again the disciples are amazed, "exceedingly astonished" the text reads. They ask the question which now must be verbalized - "Who, then, can be saved? If what He says is true, can anyone get into the Kingdom?" They got an enigmatic answer: "With men it is impossible, but not with God. With God all things are possible."

Does that mean we can disregard everything which has preceeded, that it doesn't matter? Does it mean a new legalism: that selling out is the new law for getting in? Does it put Jesus Christ and financial success at opposite ends of the spectrum? What is the Word of God here for us?

Jesus had some wealthy friends: Nicodemus, Zacheus, Joseph of Arimathea, to name three. He did not instruct every wealthy person he met to sell and give away. What He said to this young man appears to be a prescription for him. It was what this man would have to do if he wished to experience his salvation.

The subject of the whole discourse is the new life given in Jesus Christ: full life, eternal life, salvation - if you will. Among its characteristics are joy, a sense of wholeness and freedom. When the young man frantically asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life he confessed that it was not part of his experience. Jesus, I have concluded, saw immediately a man imprisoned by his own possessions and the way of life which provided them. He didn't own his possessions; he was owned by them. And there was no possibility of him knowing the joy and peace of salvation so long as that remained true.

It was a prescription for a particular man, but as is usually the case, we can find something of ourselves in the story. If first century Judaism equated wealth

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with righteousness, we have amplified that theme to equate ownership with success. Our humanity is defined not by our being - the essence of our humanity - but by Madison Avenue in terms of buying, owning, using. Slick magazine advertisements assure us that the Kingdom of God, or something very nearly like it, will be open to us when we drive the right car, drink the proper scotch and dress in clothes arranged by the correct designer. We live in a culture that simply can't bear to think about having, doing and owning less rather than more, year after year, a culture surely on its way to some day of reckoning because it simply refuses to pay for what it uses - in energy, in natural resources, in air and water, in the pollution of the environment with its refuse, its cans and bottles.

Years ago Halford Luckock observed a truth that should now be apparent. "The hazard of wealth lies in the fact that means have a way of becoming ends. Having becomes a substitute for being, riches can imprison a man in a world of illusion." (Interpreters Bible, vol. 7, 9.806).

Wealth is not evil in itself. Productivity - and there doesn't seem to be a way to have productivity without someone making money - successful productivity is the only thing that can possibly feed the world's hungry people. There are plenty of flaws in our system. But perhaps the cruelest political joke of all is the Marxist fantasy that communism works. It doesn't. But the fact remains that is terribly easy to be possessed by what we think we possess: to be owned by our own wealth: to be in captivity to our expectations: to erect a new Golden Calf called Gross National Product. There is a sense in which Jesus was absolutely, literally, fundamentally accurate in the most pragmatic of ways. There is a sense in which you and I don't really own a thing which we are not willing to give away. There is a very real sense in which you are owned by - your humanity if defined by - whatever you cannot and will not give away. That is the issue in this text. Let's not be guilty of compromising it. Douglas John Hall writes that just as Jesus precipitated a crisis in the life of this young man, so the Gospel will precipitate crises wherever it is proclaimed with integrity. Hall said something in a lecture I heard this summer which seems to fit our text this morning, "In our hands Christianity has become comforting not critical, its adherents indifferent not urgent...We have achieved nonchalance about religious questions...Our culture has anesthetized itself to the important questions of life." (Christ and Crisis, Lecture, Union Theological Seminary, July 1979).

So, with His disciples He astonished - not simply at the demands He seems to be making, but the inherent truth you can hear in His words. You don't have anything you can't give away. In fact, you can't live until you know a little bit about dying.

In a class at Princeton Seminary one time a student who was a refugee from Chinese Communism prayed this prayer which has now become a kind of classic. "O God, give us something to die for: for if we have nothing to die for, we have nothing for which to live."

The final word in this remarkable sequence of scripture is a word of grace. With God, all things are possible. Rich, poor - God loves all.God will take care of all. For all - the final issue has been resolved. That is good news in capital letters.

What remains is life, in this world. What remains is peace, joy, slavation - or anxiety, worry, frustration.

To a young man who looks and sounds very familiar Jesus spoke words which must take shape somehow in your life and mine - in ways known best and only - to you and me...

> "You lack one thing: go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."
>
> Amen.

O God, help us to loosen our grip and to extend open hands - to someone who needs us, to someone who loves us. Help us, Father, to loosen our hold - and to open receptive arms to you, our joy, our salvation: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.